

Profile

Max Wiznitzer: ever hopeful, ever happy



It would surely be impossible for someone who works at a place called Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital to be anything but joyful and benevolent. Max Wiznitzer, director of the Rainbow Autism Center at the hospital in Cleveland (OH, USA), certainly lives up to that expectation. Wiznitzer is also an associate professor of paediatrics and neurology at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Wiznitzer's sunny disposition comes in large part from his job satisfaction. "I've always liked working with children", says Wiznitzer. He spent his college summers working as a camp counsellor and "loved it".

"One of the fun things about working with children is that you can play with them and you can joke with them and you can giggle with them", says Wiznitzer. "You can't do that with the adults—they're much more formal."

Wiznitzer's work is not only a great source of satisfaction, but it also keeps him grounded. "When I go into my office, and I've got a little kid there, they're not impressed with my credentials, they don't really care whatever honours or committees or boards or whatever it is I sit on. They only care who I am as a person." He continues: "If I'm examining a baby and I take his diaper off and I stand at the wrong end, you know what he's going to do, don't you? He's not going to care that I'm Professor Wiznitzer."

The desire to work with children started at a young age for Wiznitzer, but the ambitions for a medical career started even younger. He grew up in Chicago (IL, USA), having moved there from his birthplace Panama when he was 6 years old, and was a regular at the local library. "Once a week I would go to the library and take out books and I would read books about medicine...I thought it was a fascinating area", says Wiznitzer. "From the time I was in the grade school, I was determined to be a doctor." He never considered any other career.

After grade school Wiznitzer attended an all-boys public high school that specialised in science and mathematics. The choice wasn't made on the basis of his medical aspirations though, says Wiznitzer, but because he had friends there. It was a serendipitous choice because it happened to be one of the best high schools in the city. "We also had probably one of the better sports teams, but believe me, I was not a sports person. You don't want me on any sports team", Wiznitzer laughs. He describes his younger self as "a bit nerdy".

Wiznitzer chose Northwestern University in Chicago for his medical degree, and after college he began an extensive period of training. He spent 4 years in Cincinnati: 3 years training in paediatrics followed by

1 year in developmental paediatrics. He then trained in child neurology for a further 3 years at the University of Pennsylvania (PA, USA). And finally he spent 2 years at Albert Einstein College of Medicine (NY, USA) studying disorders of higher cortical function in children. 9 years? "My wife is a very patient woman", Wiznitzer concedes. The pair met in Cincinnati and shared an interest in children and developmental disorders—she was studying for her masters in special education and went on to teach at a preschool for children with autism.

By strange coincidence, the Wiznitzers later had a son, now 19 years old, who had learning and developmental challenges. "That has been a stressor", says Wiznitzer. But, not surprisingly, Wiznitzer, who never seems to complain, sees the positive side. "It has taught me greater empathy for the families", he says. "There's always a silver lining to any cloud. And that's always been my philosophy in life... Everything always works out."

It is this endlessly positive attitude that keeps Wiznitzer going when he has to deal with the toughest of cases. "I'm often working with kids that I can't fix", he laments, but adds, "My attitude is, you can't fix them today, but we have no idea if we can't do something tomorrow, or the next year or the next year or the year after that."

Wiznitzer doesn't just hope for scientists to make a breakthrough—he is actively involved in research himself. One of the reasons he joined the Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in 1986, he says, was because it was part of a multicentre research grant into autism funded by the National Institutes of Health. Since then, he has contributed to a number of clinical studies, not just on autism (his specialty), but also childhood seizures and the neurodevelopmental disorder Rett syndrome.

Wiznitzer is currently involved in a study with Detroit-based researcher, Diane Chugani (Wayne State University, MI, USA). "She's using a medication that, from a theoretical standpoint, might improve the development of the brain of kids with autism", says Wiznitzer, "That's exciting because that means that we might be able to positively affect the development of the brain of these kids when they're young and improve their ability to function when they are older", he adds.

Wiznitzer realises that scientific studies often only provide very small steps forward, but they are forward nonetheless. And as Wiznitzer positively projects: "We're going to get there. I know we're going to get there someday."

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